

## **Prison of Dreams / Graciela Kartofel**

Throughout much of its history, photography has focused on exogenous elements: documenting the physiognomy of human beings, natural phenomena, family events: the factual. An equally high proportion was dedicated not to capturing interior portraits, but instead to outer beauty, the exotic. These general considerations have been mutable, as have personal interests, proportions, and ideals. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a great interest in documenting facts, giving rise to an incipient and parallel tendency toward photographers with artistic ambitions. This richly ambivalent situation continued, eventually merging with total modernity.

While the history of this medium has mostly been dominated by a single purpose—the need to inform—social issues and the impact of psychoanalysis fostered other visions that became increasingly interior and subjective, not necessarily destructive but charged with melancholy. Only recently, in the latter half of the twentieth century, and more specifically from the 1960s on, did we witness the emergence of current ways of breaking with tradition, of the individual destruction of the self, and the individual destruction of photographs as actual entities, which are scratched, collaged, multiplied in order to modify their meaning; they are mitigated with pictorial materials, written on, technologized. The photography that developed in Germany was one of the main nuclei for such experimentation.

Given her classical expressions, Yovanovich may be classified as a photographer in the European tradition: formal, with traditional framing, centralized views, and a range of grays with careful balance. Because the most noteworthy shifts came about within European photography (German photographers are a good example of this), the recent present reflects considerable change for the traditionalist Yovanovich: she takes a close approach to her subjects, dares to reedit her own shots, uses asymmetry, and embraces the rupture of lineal development in photographic museography in order to form the groups of photographs collected in this portfolio.

Looking inward is a risk that not everyone dares to take. Vida Yovanovich began photography to face up to life's burdens. Almost unintentionally, she hid behind the lens as she looked for herself. The thing is, a camera possesses a dark, secret, and magical zone, just as life does. She began with her well-known work in reproduction, alternating with walking about taking photographs in search of her personal themes. Her series *Dolls* combined the documentary and artistic aspects superbly, and features some important photographic moments. Other themes—children and self-portraits—predate the collection presented in its entirety for the first time here: *Prison of Dreams*. An infinite and universal prison that no one seeks out but where we will all inevitably arrive.

What is the origin of this prison series? It stems from the fears, impotence, the irreversibility and uncontrollability of the passage of time, and the sorrow that comes from watching the people around us as they age. There is little regret over her own aging: this reflection goes beyond that. *Prison of Dreams* addresses the changes and

questions that reveal life's rapid pace, from which this series stems. Vida Yovanovich dares to show this vast portfolio of over four years of work: a comprehensive, coherent, heartrending, and poetic series of "the aged". There are different subsets within the series—indoor bathrooms, squared floor tiles, women. The overall sense is of diptychs, triptychs, and individual photos calling to each other in a dodecaphonic harmony.

In *Prison of Dreams*, there are certain tiny details that may appear to be only that: details in a photograph, but which achieve a tragic symbolic dimension. A tear or stain in the wallpaper is the trace of a being to which a woman prefers to turn her back on. A light bulb inside a bedroom connected by an extension cord to an electrical outlet on the wall of the neighboring room are two vertices of a triangle that is completed by a human figure. The electrical elements are mutually ratified as the antithesis of that wearied person whose arm and fist allude to a hypothetical electrical connection, while she prattles in a void, trying to memorize something, but only managing to regain her blank stare.

The scenes are upheld by a tragic structure. In most of the images, not only one but several doors symbolize the incoherent architecture of a society that merits the same adjective: an infinity of doors onto the void for individuals without any way out. Likewise, these same doors allude to the photographer's existential quests.

*Prison of Dreams* includes whites, blacks, and grays. It is a show inhabited by the alienated—archetypes that derive from Goya's *Quinta del Sordo*—and that could easily be included in an exhibition along with anything by Sigmar Polke, or Thomas Struth's photographs of social behavior, or Thomas Ruff's portraits. In this collection that presents itself at the precipice of life, there is no lack of sensuality, as in the case of the figure seen from behind in the light of a cold room with mosaic tiles. The requirements of the gazes are also not lacking. The hollow cries, the resignation, the noticeable rictus of the clenched lips marking the end, are not hidden. There are few words, company is a tacit gesture, a mute survival that is recorded and treasured in these photographs.

The subjects were never forced to accept these shots: they emerged from long visits. They are scenes wherein intimacy—involuntary or not—is stripped bare and clothed, where reactions are distinct and individual. Many of these photographs are images that function in pairs. Pairs of interiors determined by infinite doors, windows, or occasional mirrors. Pairs. Pairs of individuals, pairs of things, pairs of antinomies. Pairs: the pair that consists of life and death.

The will to survive. *Vida*. Life.

(1) Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson), 48.

**KARTOFEL, Graciela. "La cárcel de los sueños," March–April, 1993.**